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Our ref: Q2020/1737/MJR
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Dear Mr Hall,

ISLINGTON DESIGN REVIEW PANEL
RE: CASTLE & FITZROY HOUSE (PRE-APPLICATION REF: Q2020/1737/MJR)

Thank you for attending Islington's Design Review Panel meeting on 24th May 2022 for a 2nd Review of the scheme. The proposal under consideration is for:

Demolition of the existing B1 office building with B8 data storage centre at basement level and the erection of a part 5, part 6, and part 7 storey office led development, up to 32m in height (to top of plant), to provide circa 30,000sqm (GIA) of B1 office floorspace, a new B8 data storage facility and new ground floor A1 and A3 uses.

Review Process

The Design Review Panel provides expert impartial design advice following the 10 key principles of design review established by Design Council/CABE. The meeting was held in person at Islington Town Hall.

The scheme was reviewed by Richard Portchmouth (Chair), Thomas Lefevre, Tim Ronalds and Alec Forshaw. Apologies were received from Stuart Piercy. It included a presentation by the development team followed by a question and answer session, and a discussion of the proposals.

The views expressed below are a reflection of the Panel's discussions as an independent advisory board to the Council.

Panel's Observations

The meeting began with a presentation of the scheme by the project architects Morris & Company. A question and answer session between Panel Members and the applicant team then took place followed by a commentary on the scheme provided by each member. The meeting concluded with the Chair's summing up.

These items, commencing with the question and answer session, are recorded below.

Questions and Answers

Panel Query: The panel queried the absence of information in the presentation with regard to the impacts of sunlight and daylight on adjacent properties. The team were reminded that the panel had asked for this at DRP1.

Answer: The applicant explained that studies have been undertaken testing the impact on adjacent residential properties, in Clere and Epworth Streets and that setbacks have been designed where it is possible to mitigate.

The Council responses that given the scale of the scheme and its context, and that the adjacent residential is within converted buildings, the indicative degree of impact is, on balance, likely to be acceptable. Initially a mitigating design response had included a 3m setback to Epworth Street frontage. However the Council considered this to be harmful to the character of the streetscape. This has been reduced to a more acceptable and subtle 1.5m

Panel Query: Which areas at ground and basement 1 level are publicly accessible?

Answer: The central area around the base of the atrium and connecting the main and both secondary entrances is all publicly accessible. A smaller area, focused around the base of the atrium at the basement level, is also publicly accessible. There will be security measures (turnstiles etc) to the lift/stair core delineating the 'private' from the public.

Panel Query: The 2-storey basement is very large. The Panel queried need for such a large volume on grounds of sustainable development and questioned whether, for example, the gym could be reduced in size and therefore the basement.

Answer: The floorspace required to meet current cycle storage, plus accompanying shower/changing is extensive as is plant take.

Market advice has informed the required scale of the gym for this scale of development.

Panel Query: What does a typical floor space look like? Have acoustic materials been considered?

Answer: Working to just under 4m floor to floor which equates to 2.8m to underside of the beams. The beams themselves are 680mm deep. The windows are high on floor to ceiling.

Acoustic treatment will come forward at a later stage – still some way off arriving at this level of detailing.

Panel Query: Queried how the design team had arrived at the preferred atrium shape.

Answer: The properties of the selected curve shape for the atrium were considered to reflect the emerging architecture as well as the curves seen within elements of the context. Seeking a flowing undulating effect. The curved shape was also felt to be very democratic creating sociable spaces and edges – much like a circular table.

Panel Query: Windows – the panel queried the properties of the fenestration including whether windows would be openable and, given they're such a big part of the scheme, whether there was sufficient variation.

Answer: The windows are fairly consistent throughout but there are single and double bays and in some instances there will be 'Juliet' windows/doors. A repetitive fenestration pattern is very characteristic of the area however refinement is continuing. Windows are however intended to be openable.

Panel Query: The panel queried the rationale behind the large double-height primary entrance to Paul Street given it is only a minor road within the broader urban structure. Queried whether there any of a comparable scale in the vicinity.

Answer: While there may not be many similar scaled entrances locally, (the old fire station on Paul Street has a double-height arched entrance) the design team seeks to create a civic scaled entrance to help invite people into the complex, and to the public space within. The scale of the development is considered to warrant a gesture of this proportion. The secondary entrances to the side streets are considerably more modest and therefore this primary entrance seeks to differentiate itself as such through scale as well as detail.

Panel Query: The panel sought confirmation that no natural gas will be used on site and sought information as to the location of the air handling units.

Answer: The applicant confirmed that natural gas will not be used on site – the heating and hot water systems will be all electric and the back-up generator supplied with a biofuel.

Air handling units are located within the basement. While this is not optimal, all the risers are continuous and straight so quite efficient for this arrangement

Panel Query: Given the insertion of the atrium into the centre of the scheme, a great and very interesting element, it does come with the loss of lettable floorspace and therefore a considerable 'price tag'. Are there environmental benefits – e.g., a natural chimney – that could be capitalised as a result of its scale and location? The harder it can be made to work the more beneficial it will be.

Answer: The atrium will ventilate the foyers and itself. Further investigation can be explored to see if it can also be used to assist more in the overall building ventilation strategy. It will also beneficially bring daylight into the building. It is also supported for its 'WOW' factor – the generosity of space is seen as an attractor and a net beneficial element.

Panel Query: The panel sought further assessment and consideration of the Clere Street elevation in terms of how successfully it was accommodating all its servicing needs. The existing trees to Clere Street should encourage some landscape interventions as well to this edge to help soften and counteract its servicing impacts.

Answer: The vehicular service entrance is located in the similar location to the existing entrance. It is to be adjoined by four bays which are proposed to accommodate substations (not loading bays). Landscape architects are working on the scheme design and interventions at street level are being, and will continue to be, considered including regard for the wellbeing of the existing Clere Street trees.

Panel Commentary

The Panel consider that the views from Bunhill Fields – Views 26 a & c – are very important. Bunhill Fields and the Wesley's Chapel are of international importance and exceptional interest as reflected in their Grade I designation. It is considered that the scheme does still prominently impinge on the backdrop of the Chapel and therefore its legibility. While there may have been some minor reductions to height and mass, and a suggestion that the plant element, which is now being lowered into the 5th floor, is to be set within a perforated enclosure, it is considered that one will still read this as bulk.

To avoid such serious harm there will have to be a reduction in floorspace to the 5th floor in this vantage point. It is not considered to have been satisfactorily addressed despite it being raised as an unacceptably harmful impact in DRP1.

While the design concept is enjoyed in regard to the showroom/factory referencing, technically this is not a correct interpretation given the workshops were generally to upper levels and the 'showroom' located to ground floor. That said, the breaking up of the massing of the building through the application of ornamentation as proposed is welcomed.

Panel raised some concern about the double-height entrance to Paul Street which could be read as 'City Creep'. Paul Street is not a major thoroughfare – it is more of a side street within the broader context. The Panel queries whether the development needs such a large gesture to this edge?

The Panel is supportive of the proposed materials and considered that the pre-cast bays with their different colours and patterns will add to the richness of the area.

The panel considered that the scheme was well judged and sits well in its context. The warehouse/factory conceptual approach, notwithstanding the Panel's earlier comment on historical interpretation, as an end result is very positive. It was noted that all the streets around are essays in how to design with a load bearing façade. This scheme is not going to have load bearing facades so will never achieve the tautness of the historic facades and this needs to be fully and carefully considered in the continued design development of the facades.

This is a very deep block and this makes the atrium a very important element. The selected curved form is reminiscent of a theatre space which may or may not counteract the claustrophobia one might experience or associate with such a deep plan. Would perhaps the balustrades benefit from another design treatment?

With regard to the internal office space, some on the Panel considered that the castellated beams appeared rather a crude response when compared to the care and attention that has been applied to the external facades. Concern was expressed that it might appear as too crude an element in such an emerging fine design. It was noted by the applicant team that they have been balancing aesthetics with carbon impacts and that this was an efficient response which they will continue to refine.

However, some on the Panel considered that the structural solutions were working well, particularly from an environmental point of view.

The Panel noted that the design team promote the development as best in class and highly efficient and sustainable, but these assertions must be accompanied by factual evidence, and this remains a missing yet critically important element. In particular, the targeted level of energy use (EUI in kWh/m²/yr), renewable energy generation (in kWh/m²/yr) and upfront embodied carbon (in kgCO₂/m²/yr) should be declared.

The double basement represents a very significant proportion of the building's upfront embodied carbon and efforts to minimise it as much as possible would be very beneficial from an environmental point of view.

The thermal performance of the façade needs to be demonstrated given the challenges associated with tying the structure to the façade and the varying thickness which could reduce insulation significantly in places.

The Panel stressed the importance of not only designing buildings that use less energy but also to design in means to generate renewable energy (e.g. roof mounted PVs). The current use of the roof space, primarily as a roof terrace, is not considered satisfactory or 'best in class' from this point of view.

The Panel queried whether the articulation of the corner balconies was working well enough in design terms whereby their delicate treatment differs so significantly from the robustness of the other façade elements.

And while the Panel enjoyed the historic referencing and analogies, the design team must be careful to create a building that reflects its Shoreditch setting and not a City/Moorgate context.

The Clere Street 'bays' are a significant part of the elevation to this edge and the Panel encourages innovative thinking in their treatment given their potential impact on the streetscape.

The Paul Street entrance, in addition to the earlier commentary around its proportions, the Panel considered that the column bays on either side of the portal appear fragile and could be adjusted to give a more robust and assertive appearance.

The Panel advised the applicant to consider the potential for urban greening at street level, creating better street environments. This in turn may improve the Urban Greening Factor thereby freeing up some roof space for the provision of renewable energy facilities.

Chair's Summing Up

The Chair thanked the applicant team for their clear and thorough presentation. The Panel remains encouraged by what was presented and overall felt that a very positive response has been offered. There was an acknowledgement that the scheme has developed positively in design terms, since the first review in November 2021. It is altogether a more confident, robust, and concise piece of architectural thinking. The Panel compliments the applicant on the narrative that it has begun to introduce and to capture within the building, including a reflection and acknowledgement of the area's past.

The most critical point that Panel has made relates to the impact of the scheme on the setting of the Wesley's Chapel and Bunhill Fields. The Panel advises the design team to seriously think about addressing the form of the building in order to lessen the impact on these critically important heritage assets. This is considered the priority of the Panel.

The Panel consider that the design team may wish to further consider its approach to the main entrance and its relationship to the broader morphology and Paul Street itself and that more design development is required in this location.

A further challenge is the need to look at the atrium's form and impact on the quality of the internal environment with regard to the introduction of light, air and amenity for the office users. There may currently be too much internal focus rather than exploring the potential for a wider contribution to the overall form and function of the building.

With regard to the debate about the castellated beams, while complimenting the sustainability undertaken in the designs, it is equally important that the character and spatial generosity of contextual historic industrial buildings is also captured. There is something rather wonderful about the structure within the factories and showrooms of Shoreditch – including the way it contributes to the robust and utilitarian architecture. Therefore, there is a challenge whereby the joy of the interiors needs to be captured as well as embedding sustainable design requirements.

Some concern about the extent of the double basement remains and the applicant is advised to consider whether it could be reduced.

Much more detail is needed with regard to energy – efficiencies and generation, sustainability, and the circular economy going forward in order to match the positive rhetoric.

The success of the building will undoubtedly be in its detail. The design team were commended for approaching the site, and scheme design, in a very responsible, tactile and sympathetic way. The Panel considers it important that the architects be retained to RIBA Stage 4 and beyond in order to ensure that the building delivers on its promise.

The Panel would welcome a final review of the scheme in advance of its submission.

Confidentiality

Please note that since the scheme is at pre-application stage, the advice contained in this letter is provided in confidence. However, should this scheme become the subject of a planning application, the views expressed in this letter may become public and will be taken into account by the Council in the assessment of the proposal and determination of the application.

Yours sincerely,

Linda Aitken
Principal Design Officer